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ABSTRACT

The concept of cognitive egocentrism is presented, supported with experimental evidence, and operationally defined on a scale of egocentric distance from "ego" ("speaker") to "hearer," to "other," to "concrete entity." This concept is used in evaluating the hypothesis that the nominative case in German means "speaker's focus of attention" in opposition to the dative and accusative cases. Relative clauses are used to quantitatively test this general hypothesis in two deductively derived versions: (1) in a relative clause the relativized entity (--relative pronoun) will be in the nominative case because of its high salience to the speaker; or (2) the entity most akin to the speaker (as defined by the scale of egocentric distance above) will be in the nominative. Quantitative data (taken from a novel and a popular science essay) show that parts (1) or (2) or both of the hypothesis are confirmed in 96% of relative clauses in running discourse. Supporting evidence is reported from a study of newspaper reports of soccer matches. (Author/AM)

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Egocentrism: Its Effect on the Form and Use of Grammar

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Language is a device of communication. This is a statement which we as linguists may be disposed to accept as a defining characteristic of language, and yet it tells us little about what to expect in the form of language until we begin to look at properties of the organism which uses language to communicate. As an analogy, machines can communicate information by means of artificial languages, and the form of these languages is largely determined by the information processing biases inherent in the machine. Computers, for example, have a great memory storage capacity as a strength and lack of intelligence as a weakness. They are, however, completely unbiased with respect to what kinds of things they will process information about: they will deal with information about people, other computers, objects, or abstract ideas in as great or little detail as they are programmed to do, with no difference in processing difficulty. However, people, the users of human language, do have a bias in this respect: they prefer to deal with people, and they prefer most to deal with themselves. In other words, humans have a bias of egocentric interest. As William James, the American psychologist, put it: "the altogether unique kind of interest which each human mind feels in those parts of creation which it can call me or mine... is a fundamental psychological fact." (p. 290)

This preferential bias for being interested in ourselves or things like ourselves turns up in the results of psychological experiments. In one such experiment Scarlett and Press (1975) told their subjects a story in which two boys go to the zoo, and then separate to visit different animals and have

different experiences. Each subject was asked to recount as many events of the story as he could remember. The experimenters personalized the story for each subject so that one boy had the subject's own name or his best friend's name. The other boy was unfamiliar. In the results the subjects remembered most about the boy with their own name, less about the boy with their best friend's name, and least about the unfamiliar boy. Thus each subject showed an egocentric bias in remembering details from the story.

This and other experiments support the fact that we human beings prefer to pay attention to ourselves or to things akin to ourselves, and that this bias is part of the way we perceive the world and process information about it. Let us now look at how this egocentric bias affects the way in which speakers use a specific grammatical system: the case system of modern standard German. In Zubin (1976) I proposed that the nominative case signals "Speaker's Focus of Attention" in opposition to the dative and accusative case forms, which signal lack of Focus:

1. Focus of Speaker's Attention $\begin{cases} IN_{\underline{nom}} \\ OUT_{\underline{dat},\underline{acc}} \end{cases}$

(These three forms, it should be noted, are simulaneously interlocked in a second grammatical system in which they signal relative degrees of activity/potency in the event.)

The meaning "Focus of Attention" suggests that a speaker will select in each utterance the entity which most strongly captures his attention at that point in discourse, i.e., which is most <u>salient</u> to him in the immediate context. In addition, the egocentric attentional bias just discussed suggests that this focal entity will, at least part of the time, be the speaker himself, or an entity which is closer in kind to the speaker than the other entities named in the utterance. The immediate problem in validating this Focus

hypothesis is verification. In looking at utterances out of context, or even in discourse, it is often a moot question what entity the speaker is really attending to. Numbers (2a) and (2b) illustrate this:

2a. Der Junge stand dem Riesen gegenüber.
'the youth(nom) stood across from the giant'

2b. Der Riese stand dem Jungen gegenüber.
'the giant(nom) stood across from the youth'

In (2a) the speaker seems to have directed his attention to the youth, while in (2b) the speaker seems to be attending to the giant. Yet there is no evidence beyond the nominative itself with which to objectively verify this claim. There are many factors which can guide the speaker's attention, more than can be controlled experimentally at one time, and some of them may not be apparent in the immediate context. What is needed is a diagnostic environment which highlights one or two attentional factors and obviates the rest. Such an environment is provided by relative clauses. In a relative clause it is known--independent of the case forms--which entity has high salience for the speaker: it is the "topic" of the relative clause, the entity about which the relative clause provides identifying or descriptive information. This is, of course, the entity referred to by the relative pronoun. In (3), for example:

3. (...Junge...), der den Riesen ansah.
'(...youth...), who(nom) looked at the giant'

the speaker gives identifying or descriptive information about the youth, not about the giant, from which we can infer that the youth is most salient to the speaker. The relative clause is thus a good diagnostic environment for testing the hypothesis that the nominative means "Speaker's Focus of Attention" in opposition to the dative and accusative. It is predicted that:

prediction 1: in relative clauses the speaker will put the relative pronoun in the nominative because of the high salience of the relativized entity.

This prediction is illustrated by (3) above. In addition is is predicted that, because of the egocentric bias discussed above:

prediction 2: in relative clauses the speaker will put the entity most akin to himself in the nominative.

For testing this latter part of the hypothesis the egocentric bias will be operationally defined by the following scale:

5. speaker (ego) > hearer > other person > concrete entity (inanimate) > abstract entity

The hypothesis claims that the entity closest to the speaker at the left hand of the scale will be preferred in the nominative. Number (6) illustrates the application of this scale to a specific utterance:

6. (...Stein...), den der Junge warf. youth (animate) > stone (inanimate)
'(...stone...), which(acc) the youth(nom) threw'

Note that the youth, being animate, is closer than the stone to the ego end of the scale in (5), and that he is in the nominative case in accordance with the hypothesis. We thus have two valid applications of the Focus hypothesis in the context of relative clauses: one predicts that the relative pronoun will be in the nominative because of salience, while the other predicts that the entity most resembling ego will be in the nominative. These predictions, it should be emphasized, do not reflect two different meanings for the nominative case, but rather two different ways in which a human being is apt to exploit the meaning "Focus of Attention," given his psychological makeup.

The predictions were tested on a sample of all relative clauses from two texts: a novel and a popular science book. In order to make the test fair, only relative clauses containing at least two candidates for focus were included. The following table gives the results of this test. For clarity there is a square around the relative pronoun and a circle around the more ego-like entity. The nominative is underlined.

Table 1: frequency with which the more salient entity (named by relative pronoun) or the more ego-like entity is in the nominative case in relative clauses.

[ ] = relative pronoun; ( ) = more ego-like entity; ____ = nominative

		N	percent
a.	(...Stein...), [der] (den Riesen) traf. '(...stone...), which(nom) hit the giant(acc)'	125	29%
b.	(...Stein...), [den] (der Junge) warf. '(...stone...), which(acc) the youth(nom) threw'	181	42%
c.	(...Junge...), (der) den Stein warf. '(...youth...), who(nom) threw the stone(acc)'	103	24%
d.	(...Riese...), (den) der Stein traf. '(...giant...), whom(acc) the stone(nom) hit'	19	4%
	total	428	99%

Heinrich Böll. Der Zug war pünktlich. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972.
Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. Atomenergie und Atomzeitalter. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1957.

In (7a) the relative pronoun, referring to the stone, is in the nominative. There were 125 such clauses in the sample, or 29 percent. In (7b) the youth, who is more ego-like than the stone, is in the nominative. Such clauses made up 42 percent of the sample. In (7c) both these factors coincide. The nominative entity--the youth--is indicated by the relative pronoun and is more ego-like than the stone. Such clauses made up 24 percent of the sample. Finally, in (7d) neither factor correlates with the nominative, represented by only a small remainder--4 percent--of the sample. Note that sentences of type (7d) are not unacceptable, but that they are extremely low in frequency.

In 96 percent of the clauses in the sample a demonstrably focus-deserving entity has been placed in the nominative case. This entity may be focus-deserving because of its momentary salience indicated by the relative pronoun, or because of its ego-like qualities, or both these factors may coincide. The table reveals a systematic avoidance in discourse of clauses in which neither of these focus factors is present.

This paper has presented a two-pronged hypothesis about the meaning of the nominative case. The meaning "Speaker's Focus of Attention" is interpreted by the language user either as a momentary salient center of attention or as an egocentric center of attention. The egocentricity factor in attention has turned out to be crucial in the validation of this focus hypothesis. A glance at (7b) in the table will show that 42 percent of the clauses in the sample are accounted for by the egocentric bias alone. Without a full appreciation of cognitive egocentrism as a psychological factor influencing the speaker's distribution of attention, the focus hypothesis would have been impossible to validate.

Evidence from other quantitative linguistic studies supports the egocentricity factor in "Focus of Attention." Ertel (1977), for example, studied the distribution of the nominative and oblique cases in reports of soccer matches taken from local newspapers in Germany. For each match Ertel had two reports: one from the home-town newspaper of each team. In looking at sentences conveying an interaction of the opposing teams or players he found in a great majority of instances that the home team or player was in the nominative, while the opposing team or player was in an oblique case, even when the home team had lost the match (the home team got the nominative over the opposing team by a ratio of 5 to 2). For example, (8a) would tend to appear in the hometown paper of Overrath's team, while (8b) would tend to appear in the hometown paper of Müller's team:

8a. Overrath(nom) took the ball from Müller.

8b. Müller(nom) lost the ball to Overrath.

Ertel thus succeeded in showing that German sports writers are guided by their egocentric bias. They manipulate their choice of grammatical forms and lexical items so that the home team players will be in the nominative.

In conclusion I would like to point out that the meaning offered here for the nominative--"Speaker's Focus of Attention"--bears a strong resemblance to traditional statements about the semantic content of the nominative, such as "topic or subject of discourse," and "what the sentence is about." The problem with these traditional formulations does not primarily lie in a misstatement of the semantic content, but rather in a failure to take seriously the premise that language is a device of human communication, and in the resulting failure to focus on psychological properties of the human language user. It is in understanding that cognitive egocentrism will

strongly influence a human speaker's manipulation of the meaning "Focus of Attention" that we are able to arrive at a satisfactory analytic validation for this meaning of the nominative case in German.

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